

The Delta of Impact: Mapping a meta-impact pathway to uncover six stepping stones of research impact

Impact takes time. It may be several years before the relevance of some research is fully recognised and implemented, or for changes to take place in bureaucratic, social, and economic systems. And yet at the start of many grants, researchers are increasingly required to develop [Pathways to Impact](#) to show what they intend to do during their research to enable impact.

Done well, this is based upon informed thinking and reflection of how research teams can draw upon and strengthen their networks and relationships to develop, share, and promote their research findings. However, for many this involves a fair amount of educated guessing, and is seen by some as another hoop to jump through to access funding or meet reporting requirements. At the macro level, collective reflection on the different methods and approaches that research projects use to promote uptake and impact is rare and has potential to encourage learning between projects and exchange around impact pathways as useful road maps for research.

THE IMPACT INITIATIVE PROGRAMME

The [Impact Initiative programme](#), funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Department for International Development (DFID), which aims to increase the uptake and impact of two major ESRC-DFID

international development research portfolios, has developed an innovative methodological approach to try to address this gap by mapping a meta-impact pathway at the portfolio level.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

The approach took the [ESRC definitions of impact](#) – instrumental, conceptual, and capacity building – as a starting point, and continues to build upon previous Impact Initiative work that emphasises the relational dimensions of impact (Georgalakis, Jessani, Oranje and Ramalingam, 2017; Georgalakis and Rose, 2019). The aim was to unpack these broad categories to identify the patterns, synergies, and gaps across impact pathways at the portfolio level and to provide new insights into the processes through which development research supports developmental outcomes and impact.

The method was trialled during the [Power of Partnerships: Research to Alleviate Poverty](#) conference held in Delhi, 3–5 December 2018, which brought together researchers from the

[Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation](#) to discuss the impacts of their research and celebrate the legacy and achievements of 13 years of the research portfolio.

Researchers from 37 grants presented their work to a diverse audience of policy actors, practitioners, and other academics around themes such as youth, extreme poverty, environment, social protection and health, and many others. Given the diversity of research approaches, thematic areas, and geographic coverage of the Joint Fund, the Impact Initiative has previously worked to explore synergies and understand how individual projects complement each other and together offer a coherent message to support policy and practice. However, no previous analysis of the

portfolio from the perspective of the different impact pathways had been done before.

This exercise has highlighted the strong tradition of participatory action research within the Joint Fund, with emphasis in many projects on using development research to improve the lives of the people involved. This contrasts with other positions that emphasise the uptake and use of research evidence as the key to impact. These different impact pathways coexist within the portfolio and even at the project level, highlighting the dynamic interaction and iteration between research processes and research products in supporting development outcome and impacts. This perspective highlights two key findings: first, that the lines between outcomes and

processes that support impact become quite blurred, particularly in the context of participatory action research in which the processes that enable impact are in many cases important achievements and outcomes in their own right. This is particularly true around conceptual, capacity, and relational changes in target populations, local research partners, and other key stakeholders, which can sometimes have more far reaching and sustainable consequences for poverty alleviation than instrumental changes in policies and programmes.

Second, this reflection also highlights the non-linear nature of the 'pathway' with multiple and simultaneous engagement strategies that continuously build on and add value to each other.

METHOD FOR MAPPING A META-IMPACT PATHWAY

An [Outcome Harvesting](#) approach was selected as the most suitable way to evaluate complex projects and systems (Wilson-Grau and Britt 2012; Gurman, Awangtang and Leslie 2018; Blundo-Canto, Läderach, Waldock and Camacho 2017).

Grant holders' presentations, available in advance of the conference, were mined to conduct a preliminary 'harvesting' and identify key outcome areas ahead of the event. These were then used to develop an impact pathway, visualised as a flowing river but quickly evolving to become the 'Delta of Impact' due to the varied start and end points. The Delta analogy highlights that this exercise was not about developing either a linear or prescriptive pathway to impact but about exploring the wide diversity of strategies and outcomes, represented as different tributaries and distributaries in the map. Delta is also a mathematical symbol for change.

The initial outcome areas were introduced at the beginning of the conference, using a large map of the Delta and inviting all participants to suggest other relevant outcomes emerging during the meeting. During each of the conference parallel sessions a 'river rapporteur' captured the different types of outcomes from the grant holders' presentations on sticky notes. These were then compiled onto the large Delta map in the plenary space, inserting new outcome areas as they emerged (Figure 1).

Post-conference, this information was processed using [Kumu systems-mapping software](#) to visualise the connections between individual projects and the different outcome areas and to reflect on the patterns emerging from this data (Figure 2). This was supplemented with an additional harvesting exercise from other Impact Initiative documents linked to an additional 21 projects from the research portfolio.

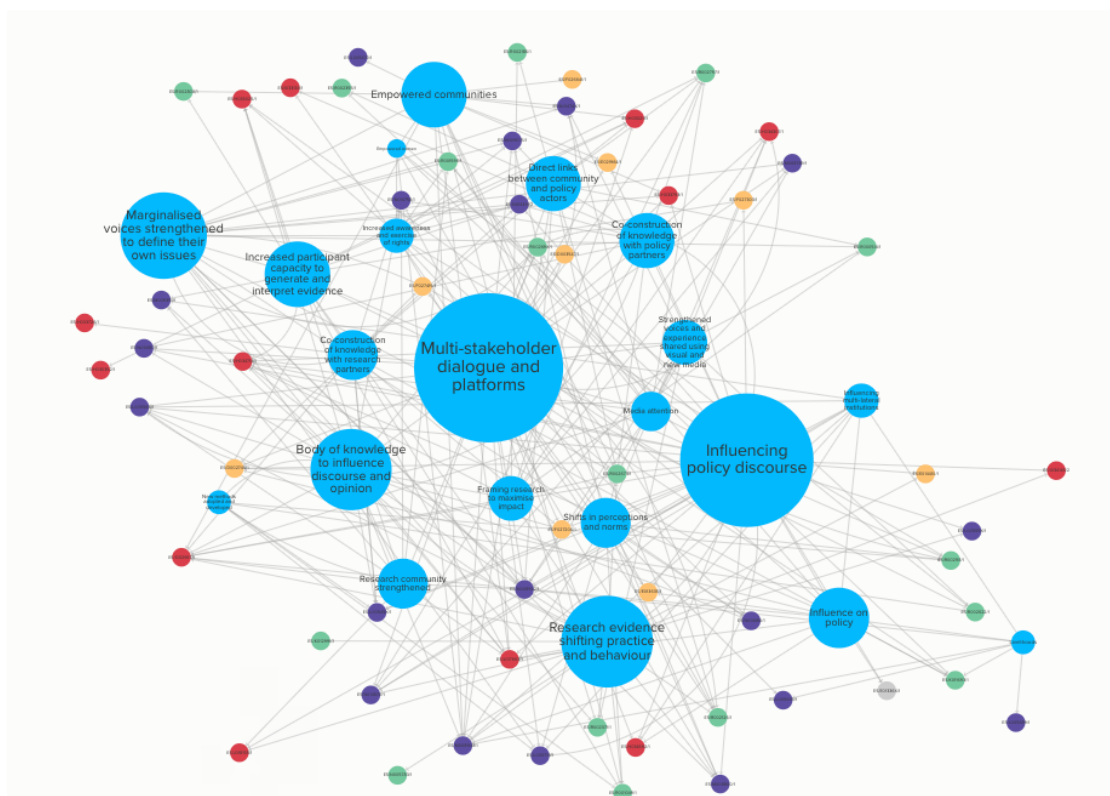
Figure 1: Delta of Impact mapping exercise



The information was further validated through a series of interviews with grant holders to reflect upon the accuracy of the Delta and its value to help articulate future impact pathways as well as to gather some specific examples of outcomes in different research contexts.

The results highlight the shared strategies that have been employed by leading researchers to increase outreach and maximise research impact. Our analysis and validation has identified six broad outcome areas or 'stepping stones', which are shared below with a series of examples from projects' experiences of implementation.

Figure 2: Kumu visualisation of outcome areas



SIX STEPPING STONES TO IMPACT IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

The mapping uncovered a total of 282 connections between 58 Joint Fund projects and 21 identified outcome areas. The mapping showed that no two projects had the same 'impact pathway' and highlighted how many projects were engaged in processes across each of the six broad categories discussed below. Feedback from grant holders also revealed the importance of iteration between each

of these areas and that in most cases efforts in each area were simultaneous rather than sequenced. This challenges the concept of an impact pathway with clear causality along a linear path and demonstrates the importance of people and processes, iteration, and flexibility on the journey to research impact.

1. Empowering communities by increasing awareness of their rights and giving them a voice to articulate their needs

The Delta of Impact mapping outlined the importance of:

- Giving communities a voice to decide and define their own issues and solutions
- Strengthening internal cohesion and representation of marginal groups in communities, particularly women and youth
- Increasing communities' awareness of rights
- Supporting communities to understand and participate in decision-making processes

The poverty alleviation focus of the Joint Fund and the participatory action research approaches used by many grant holders, create numerous opportunities for communities to engage with and directly benefit from the research process. From this perspective, communities are not merely the subjects of research but also active participants which creates the potential to contribute to a

broad range of outcomes that cut across the conceptual and relational definitions of impact.

In the [Pathways out of Poverty for Reservoir-dependent Communities in Burkina Faso](#) project there was a strong emphasis on working with communities and collective dialogue to empower communities to better articulate and communicate their problems with local government. The research around water committees brought the community together in new ways, creating opportunities for both the youth and women to participate. Marlène Elias, Bioversity International (Principal Investigator) explains that:

'We had younger and older participants saying that it was really eye-opening to have young people participate and young people now have a more formal role in the water committees. This is likely to have a continuing effect in these inter-generational relations.'

She goes on to explain how other groups, such as the fishermen, who had previously been excluded have also engaged and how this had created new spaces for women not only within the community but also to engage with other stakeholders. 'Women are now participating in community meetings as well as meetings with government representatives, extensionists and water technicians.' This empowerment at the community level has given communities more agency to identify and address issues for themselves and has also changed the nature and power dynamics of community relations with local state actors. This has led to a shift in mindset of the local government who actively engage communities as a partner in water management:

'It used to be top down – these representatives used to come to the communities when they [the representatives] had something to tell them. And now they've been involved in these platforms together and in dialogues and they are now seeking the communities' help – the relationship has very much changed.'
(Marlène Elias, Bioversity International)

Another example that is strongly grounded in participatory action research is [Poverty Alleviation in the](#)

[Wake of Typhoon Yolanda](#), which has generated strong insights into the role that communities play in their own development. This includes a stronger understanding of communities' perceptions of their needs, which has highlighted the importance of culture and community in building resilience. As Pauline Eadie, University of Nottingham (Principal Investigator) explains:

'When I went back to speak to one community leader about what the community needs now, he said a church hall and a baseball court. It's not just material things – the church hall is where people meet and the baseball court is where the community comes together. So, what he asked for was really about community.'

This project also gained new insights into how policies are actually working on the ground; for example, through a series of longitudinal surveys the project identified that individuals defined themselves as being resilient far more than communities did. 'This flies in the face of what disaster risk and management policies are trying to do because it's all about bottom up capacity building in communities and this didn't seem to be working. This needs to be looked at' (Pauline Eadie, University of Nottingham).

2. Co-construction of research across stakeholder groups

The Delta of Impact mapping outlined the importance of:

- Listening to communities and involving them in research design
- Working with civil society organisations (CSOs) and building their research capacity
- Facilitating direct links between community and policy actors
- Building broad ownership and grounding research in local context and challenges

Another key outcome is associated with co-construction and involving communities, CSOs and policy actors in the design and implementation of research and analysis and communication of findings. For communities, co-construction goes beyond the awareness and empowerment outcomes described above to encouraging their active involvement in the research design process, building their ownership of research findings and strengthening their ability to access and negotiate with decision makers. These benefits extend to other CSOs and also to state actors who are involved in research processes from an early stage and gain a new perspective of the issues on the ground and how programmes and policies are implemented.

Co-construction can strengthen relationships and build trust through stronger understanding and empathy between stakeholders, who also develop new skills through participation, dialogue, and negotiation, all of which can have benefits beyond the research project. This enables the research team to really understand local issues and frame research so that it is asking the right

questions and involving the right people, while providing insights into key stakeholders' incentives to participate.

There are numerous examples within the Joint Fund of where bringing communities, CSOs and policy actors together is at the heart of the research process. The project [Social Cash Transfers, Generational Relations and Youth Poverty Trajectories in Rural Lesotho and Malawi](#) highlighted this factor at the events that took place in the communities. 'It was useful to have two-way communication: people from the government and the district could come and explain how things [regarding cash transfers] are supposed to be and how they're supposed to work', explained Principal Investigator Nicola Ansell (Brunel University). For example, in Lesotho, people were made aware of public assistance, a mechanism for people who are destitute to claim money.

In Malawi, information was provided about how the cash-transfer system is supposed to work: 'The district people were able to explain this a bit more'; and interestingly, 'It was also a surprise to the district people how the cash-transfer scheme works in practice in the village'. These two-way communications are useful to discuss cash transfers from both perspectives to achieve a common understanding and a starting point for the co-construction of knowledge.

3. Strengthen local research capacity

The Delta of Impact mapping outlined the importance of:

- Strengthening national research systems and processes
- Building capacity of local research staff and PhD students
- Promoting South–South exchange to provide a broader perspective on policy questions
- New methods and tools adopted by local partners

Within multi-country projects, there are many opportunities for learning and capacity building through exchange across different research sites, as well as strengthening national partner organisations and their systems and processes. Involving Southern research partners and creating research opportunities for PhD students are standard practice for development researchers, but the outcomes associated with these practices are often overlooked, such as contributions to strengthening national research systems.

While it is important to acknowledge that power dynamics exist in the relationships between researchers based in the North and South, multi-country research projects also provide opportunities for South–South exchange that enable researchers to look at similar issues from a new perspective and understand their own context through a new lens. Finally, the methods, tools and approaches developed by research can be a legacy that continues to be used to contribute new understanding beyond the life of the research.

For example, in [New Norms and Forms of Development: Brokerage in Maternal and Child Health Service Development and Delivery in Nepal and Malawi](#) there was a strong emphasis on building the research capacity of the project's partners in Malawi and Nepal who were actively involved in designing the research study from

the early stages of drafting the funding proposal. Radha Adhikari, University of Edinburgh (Researcher) explains how the project offered support in research ethics and building qualitative research capacity, and some of the stakeholders, including government partners and Tribhuvan University Institute of Medicine, which trains doctors, nurses and other medical staff in Nepal, accepted this support.

This project also worked with a variety of students, both at Masters and PhD level including from Health, Foreign Aid, Finance and Management courses, which built their capacity as young researchers. The project created opportunities for exchanges between partners from Nepal and Malawi with some budget for exchange visits but also by creating a common identity through a shared website between countries and encouraging teams to collaborate on data analysis.

In addition to developing skills, research contributes to new conceptual understanding of development problems by developing new methods and approaches to analyse and understand issues. For example, the [Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia](#) project looked at both subjective and objective indicators of well-being for people with disabilities:

'Our methodology really did comparison both across and within households. It really gives you a different way of looking at the data around disability. This matched household, matched person in the household gives you a much more nuanced data around disabled and non-disabled people around access and inclusion.'
(Maria Kett, Leonard Cheshire Disability Research Centre, UCL, Principal Investigator)

Increasing our understanding of poverty is at the very heart and soul of development research, so it might sound obvious to some but should not be forgotten in this exploration of the multiple dimensions of research impact.

4. Creating spaces for dialogue and engagement

The Delta of Impact mapping outlined the importance of:

- Building awareness of different roles and priorities
- Understanding different perspectives and the reality of others
- Sharing and disseminating findings and identifying local champions
- Building local–global and vertical–horizontal relationships
- Shifting power dynamics

Achieving impact is often a complex, multifaceted, political, and contested process that, ultimately, depends on changing the attitudes and behaviours of key actors.

Strengthening the linkages between research and policy depends on the development of strong relationships between networks of stakeholders that will be able to directly effect change or influence those who are in a position to do so. The Delta mapping highlighted a broad range of mechanisms, platforms, and spaces to bring stakeholders together for dialogue and engagement. This stepping stone is about using research findings to promote and encourage dialogue between diverse stakeholders who have not necessarily been involved in the research process, so while there is a degree of overlap,

this has important differences from co-construction discussed above. Multi-stakeholder platforms are key to communicating research findings and using this dialogue to build bridges between stakeholder groups, increase understanding of each other's needs and constraints, and build ownership of the research and its findings.

This can take many shapes; for example, the [New Development Frontiers? Role of Youth, Sport and Cultural Interventions](#) project created new stakeholder networks and helped to tackle sector fragmentation through horizontal networking between non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

This has increased information flows between NGOs working on similar issues or with similar groups, with one example of two local NGOs working on rights and empowerment pooling their resources and integrating their work. As Sagar Sharma, University of Kathmandu (Co-Investigator) explains, 'They weren't really aware of what each other was doing before. Our research brought them together, which was really good.' The stakeholder

seminars also created opportunities for vertical networking between NGOs and decision makers.

The [New Norms and Forms of Development: Brokerage in Maternal and Child Health Service Development in Nepal and Malawi](#) project started with an inception workshop to encourage collaboration and engagement from early in the project and strengthen stakeholders' relationships and feelings of ownership of the project. Radha Adhikaria explains how the project was able to act as a broker when it discovered low staff morale in the government offices due to the large number of projects working in the area of maternal and child health and the demands this placed on staff time with meetings, project visits, and requests for information: 'By providing this feedback to implementing partners we were working with, the project helped to provide a bridge between the implementers and the government.'

These examples of dialogue and engagement highlight that being aware of what others are doing can be a catalyst for positive change.

5. Framing key research messages to influence discourse

The Delta of Impact mapping outlined the importance of:

- Sharing key messages through sustained use of social and other media
- Using visual methods to promote debate
- Framing research findings in the local context/ language
- Framing local issues in the context of the global agenda
- Shifting attitudes and perceptions around research topics

Key messages from research need to be shared in the right way to meet the right audience in order to influence discourse and conceptual framing of the issue. This has multiple elements; it involves identifying the right format and new and creative ways to capture audiences' attention and get them to engage with the issue, with a range of experiences of using visual and virtual media as well as more traditional formats such as radio and media to draw attention to the key messages emerging from research. It also requires using the right language and framing, which will be different for audiences at different levels of engagement.

At the local level this means understanding how development concepts such as resilience translate in local contexts. At the national level this can be demonstrating how research contributes to an existing narrative on a particular issue. And at the global level this means demonstrating the relevance of local questions to global development discourse around the Sustainable Development Goals. From this perspective the research is acting as a filter, contextualising global priorities to local

realities and aiming to elevate local experiences to inform national and global debates.

Disseminating research messages to relevant audiences has been a challenge for some projects. Many used creative means and developed opportunities as they emerged. For example, in Liberia the findings from the project [Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities](#) were presented in a range of formats, including radio interviews, presentations, and academic papers, aimed at policymakers, practitioners, and academics. Radio interviews in particular were seen as a good opportunity to share with a broad audience nationally. Principal Investigator Maria Kett explains that:

'The minister who worked in the education department had a weekly national radio show on disability... and he asked us to come on the radio and talk about our research. So, we went on the radio for an hour on his Friday afternoon slot.'

Other projects reported the benefits of prolonged use of social media not just for dissemination but also to enrich the research processes: Principal Investigator Pauline Eadie, from the programme examining [Poverty Alleviation in the Wake of Typhoon Yolanda](#), commented:

'The conversations we were having with local people really fed into the short pieces of writing we were doing and the comments we were making [on these platforms]. We managed to get the issues faced by these communities really out there so that they could be recognised more widely.'

The importance of contextualising development concepts in the local language cannot be underestimated in framing research and engaging with broad audiences, from the community to policy level. Pauline Eadie commented,

'Resilience is one of the key terms we kept going back to, over and over again'; however, in a focus group:

'Older women were asked what they understood by the meaning of resilience and they didn't know what it meant, despite it being used in the local and national government discourse and by NGOs around disaster relief since the typhoon.'

Other creative examples include the use of local theatre in the [Social Cash Transfers, Generational Relations and Youth Poverty Trajectories in Rural Lesotho and Malawi](#) project, in which young people in the villages performed dramas and songs that were filmed and in many cases gave a more nuanced and complex account of how factors such as age, gender, and generation influence the impact of cash transfers and their effects on relationships and

'really illustrated some of the things we've been trying to explore through the research' (Nicola Ansell, Principal Investigator). Video recordings of these dramas were played at subsequent stakeholder and policy meetings to bring that knowledge to the policy actors and decision makers.

Other projects reported the use of photographic exhibitions to document stories and bring diverse stakeholders together. For example the Blood Bricks programme used photographs to help tell the [Untold Stories of Modern Slavery and Climate Change in Cambodia](#). The photographs enabled researchers to demonstrate two converging issues, while the accompanying research report went beyond these silos. The photographs were an innovative way to get people, and policymakers in particular, talking about the issues uncovered by research.

6. Engaging research with policy and practice

The Delta of Impact mapping outlined the importance of:

- Framing research in policy context
- Timing of research with discourse/policy priorities
- Demonstrating value of research to address tangible problems
- Influencing partners' programmatic approaches

Influencing policy change is often viewed as the gold standard for research impact, the instrumental change that many researchers – and their funders – aspire to. In defining the impact they are seeking to achieve, research programmes seek to provide policy solutions to policy problems, and developmental outcomes are expected to emerge from the implementation of the policy rather than the research process.

At this instrumental level, there is a tendency to be quite generic in discussions about policymakers and practitioners, as well as the policies and practices that those stakeholders are responsible for; however, the Delta has provided a number of insights into the reality of influencing policy conversations.

Many research projects can claim to have influenced policy discourse, bringing new conceptual understanding of a question onto the agenda, but only very few can actually demonstrate how their research has led to a change in policy. In those cases this was largely a combination of strong networks, research that was addressing an existing policy problem, and fortuitous timing.

The research examining the [Accountability Politics of Reducing Health Inequalities in Brazil and Mozambique](#) provides an example of how these three factors have combined. The project built upon a good base of contacts and strategic networks in the sector and took place at a time when there was a policy window open. Denise Namburete, N'Weti Health (Co-Investigator) explains:

'The fact that we have done this study at this exact moment and the data we collected led us to focus on centralisation and lack of accountability in the health sector, right before the country starts this conversation – it's [the research] really providing input to the discussions to design the policies.'

The research team had an opportunity to give input into the draft five-year health plan in Mozambique. In addition, one of the consultants working with the Mozambique research team was involved with an evaluation of the current country health plan (2014–2019) and this presented an opportunity for the research evidence produced from this research project to be represented.

Framing research and its findings to speak to the current and future policy context was also key in the [New Development Frontiers: Role of Youth, Sport and Cultural Interventions](#) project, where policy actors showed an interest in the research and the potential of sport. This is due in part to the context in the countries in which the research is taking place, as policymakers are now focusing on socioeconomic development and are interested in the potential of sports interventions within their context to help achieve development outcomes.

The project's access to policymakers and government has also been helped by the research taking place in small states, as researchers have found officials to be generally more socially connected and therefore much more accessible and willing to participate in relevant stakeholder groups.

Many of the projects also highlighted how keeping on top of often rapidly changing environments or unexpected changes can prove challenging. Yet it is often these rapidly emerging issues or changes that can offer 'windows of opportunity' for engagement, and the researchers' ability to adapt and respond to these is critical.

This was highlighted by the project [At the End of the Feeder Road: Assessing the Impact of Track Construction for Motorbike Taxis on Agrarian Development in Liberia](#), where, post-election, several of the good connections that the project had made were no longer in the positions

they had previously held due to the change of government: Krijin Peters, Swansea University (Principal Investigator) explains 'When we started the research, there were general elections and the opposition party won. So, all ministers changed and so in a way you have to start over.'

This project also demonstrates how government is not the only place to influence change, with the example of how GIZ funded the upgrade of footpaths.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study build on previous understanding of how [barriers to impact](#) can be overcome and complements the findings of the [ESRC-DFID impact evaluation](#) published in 2016 (France, Rajania, Goodman, Ram, Longhurst, Pelka, and Erskine 2016). They recognise the complexities of the policy development process and the multifaceted nature of social science impact. However, the methodology devised in this study is unique. It has been devised to be collaborative and conducive to understanding the many overlapping outcomes that add up to research impact from across a diverse programme of evidence.

The ongoing analysis and examples help us to see that there are many different pathways to impact and how leading

The research project was involved in the economic assessment for that work and so they had the opportunity to present their research and findings to the monthly donor coordination meeting. "We gave input around which footpaths should be upgraded, from a research perspective. The findings showed that the tracks did make a positive change and this has led to an additional round of track upgrades being undertaken."

researchers use a range of different research and engagement strategies, which interact and reinforce each other to produce outcomes.

Many researchers interviewed also reflected how challenging it was to identify causality between the different outcome areas, with a strong emphasis on iteration between different strategies that challenge the linear concept of a pathway to impact. By using this mapping approach, we are able to demonstrate that despite the breadth and depth of the Delta there are well-trodden stepping stones to research impact that we hope will provide some insights and ideas for future conversations around how research supports development outcomes.

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Credits

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The Impact Initiative seeks to identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities, and facilitate mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

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